

The background of the cover is a watercolor illustration of a pond scene. In the center, a grey frog with a white belly and dark spots is sitting on a rock, looking up with a slight smile. Above the frog, two small white flowers with long stems are floating in the water. The pond is surrounded by tall, brown reeds and grasses. The overall color palette is muted, with browns, greys, and soft whites.

Boris Zakhoder

Little  
Grey Star

Translated by Jan Bulter

Illustrated by V. Chizhikov

“Well now” said Daddy Hedgehog, “this story is called ‘Little Grey Star’ but you can’t possibly guess what it’s about by its name. So listen carefully and don’t interrupt. All questions afterwards.”

“But are stars really ever grey?” asked Baby Hedgehog.

“If you interrupt me once more, I won’t tell you the story,” replied Daddy Hedgehog but noticing that his little son was going to cry, said more kindly, “No, they aren’t usually,

although this seems odd to me as grey is a most beautiful colour. But there was one Little Grey Star.

“So then, once upon a time there was an ugly, clumsy toad, which also reeked of garlic, and had warts instead of spikes, all over him. Can you imagine that?! Ughh!

“Fortunately, he knew neither that he was so ugly nor that he was a toad. Firstly, because he was very tiny and didn’t know much anyway, and secondly, because nobody had ever

called him a toad. He lived in a garden where Trees, Bushes and Flowers grew, and you must know that Trees, Bushes and Flowers only speak to those very dear to them. And you wouldn’t call someone you loved very, very much a toad, would you?”

Baby Hedgehog sniffed his consent.



“Well now, the Trees, Bushes and Flowers loved the toad very much and that’s why they called him by the most affectionate names. Especially the Flowers.”

“But why did they love him so much?” asked Baby Hedgehog very quietly.

Daddy Hedgehog frowned and Baby Hedgehog curled up at once.

“You’ll soon find out if you keep quiet,” Daddy Hedgehog frowned and continued, “When the toad appeared in the garden, the Flowers asked his name, and when he replied that he didn’t know, they were very happy.

“‘Oh, how wonderful!’ exclaimed the Pansies (they spotted him first). ‘Then we’ll think up one for you! If you like, we’ll call you ... we’ll call you Pansy!’

“‘Daisy sounds better,’ chimed in the Daisies. ‘It’s a much prettier name!’

“Then the Roses intervened with the suggestion that he should be called Beauty; the Bluebells demanded he be called Ting-a-ling (as this was the only word they could say)

and the Marigolds proposed Goldie.”

Baby Hedgehog chuckled and then glanced timidly at his father but Daddy Hedgehog wasn’t angry because Baby Hedgehog was rightly amused. He calmly continued, “In short, they would never have stopped arguing if it hadn’t been for the Asters and the Wise Starling.

““Let him be called Astra,’ said the Asters.

““Or, better still, Little Star,’ said the Wise Starling. ‘It means the same as Astra, only it’s simpler. What’s more, he really does look like a little star: just look what sparkling eyes he’s got! And as he’s grey, you can call him Little Grey Star, then there won’t be any confusion! That’s clear, isn’t it?’

“And everyone agreed with the Wise Starling because he was very clever and could say several real human words and whistle almost a whole tune, which was about a famous

Hedgehog, if I’m not mistaken. That’s why people had built him a little home in a poplar.

“Since then everyone started calling the toad Little Grey Star. Everyone, that is, except the Bluebells who went on calling him Ting-a-ling as this was the only word they could say.

““Star, my foot!’ hissed a fat old Slug, creeping onto a rose bush and slithering towards its tender young leaves. ‘Fine star he is! Why, he’s a most ordinary-looking grey...’

“He was about to say ‘toad’ but didn’t have time, because at that very moment Little Grey Star fixed its sparkling eyes on it and the Slug vanished.

““Thank you, dear Little Star,’ said the Rose, who had blanched with fear. ‘You’ve rescued me from a terrible enemy!’

“And you ought to know” explained Daddy Hedgehog, “that Flowers, Trees and Bushes also have enemies, although they don’t do anyone any harm, on the contrary, they only do good! Lots of them! But it’s a good thing that these enemies of theirs are quite nice to eat!”

“You mean, Little Star gobbled up the fat Slug?” asked Baby Hedgehog, licking his lips in anticipation.

“Most likely,” said Daddy Hedgehog. “Although I can’t be sure. Nobody actually saw Little Star eat the Slugs, Beastly Beetles and Catty Caterpillars. But all the Flowers’ enemies vanished as soon as Little Star fixed his sparkling eyes on them. And they vanished for good and ever since Little Grey Star settled in the garden, the Trees, Flowers and Bushes began to enjoy life much more. Especially the Flowers because the Birds protected the Bushes and Trees from their enemies but the Flowers had nobody because they were too low for the Birds.

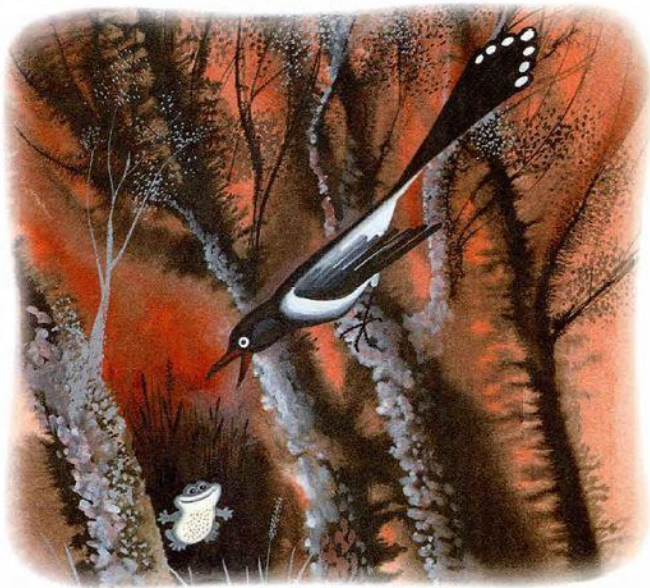
“That’s why the Flowers loved Little Grey Star so much. They bloomed joyfully every morning when he came into the garden. All you could hear was: ‘Come to us, Little Star!’ ‘No, to us first!’ ‘To us!’

“The Flowers spoke most affectionately to him, thanking and praising him to the skies but Little Grey Star kept modestly silent, for he was very, very modest, and only his

eyes continued sparkling.

“A Magpie, which liked eavesdropping on humans’ conversations, once even asked if it was true that he had a precious stone in his head which explained why his eyes sparkled so brightly!

“‘I don’t know,’ said Little Grey Star confusedly. ‘I don’t think so...’



“‘Well I never, Magpie! What a chatterbox you are!’ said the Wise Starling. ‘Not a stone but a muddle and it’s in your head, not Little Star’s! Little Grey Star’s eyes sparkle because he’s got a clear conscience. He’s doing Useful Work, you see! That’s clear, isn’t it?’”

“Daddy, may I ask a question?” asked Baby Hedgehog.

“Ask all your questions afterwards.”

“Oh, please, Daddy, just one!”

“Alright, just one.”

“Daddy, are we ... useful?”

“Very,” said Daddy Hedgehog. “Don’t you worry about that. But listen to what happened next.”

“So, as I’ve already said, the Flowers knew that Little Grey Star was good, kind and useful. The Birds knew it, too, and so did, of course, People, especially Clever People. And only the Flowers’ enemies wouldn’t agree with this. ‘Horrid, nasty thing!’ they hissed, of course, when Little Star was out of earshot. ‘Ugly, filthy little beast!’ squeaked the Beastly Beetles. ‘We’ve got to get even with him!’ seconded the Catty Caterpillars. ‘We simply can’t get any peace with him around!’



“True, nobody paid any attention to their curses and threats, and what’s more, the number of enemies gradually dwindled, but unfortunately, the Nettle Butterfly, the Caterpillars’ cousin, joined in the war. Although quite harmless and even rather pretty to look at, it was, in fact, terribly harmful. Such is often the case.

“Oh, and I forgot to say that Little Grey Star never touched Butterflies.”

“Why?” asked Baby Hedgehog. “Aren’t they nice to eat?”

“That’s got nothing to do with it, dafty. Most likely because Butterflies look like Flowers, and, you see, Little Star loved Flowers very much! And he probably didn’t know that Butterflies and Caterpillars are almost one and the same. Caterpillars, you know, turn into Butterflies and Butterflies then hatch new Caterpillars...

“So, the cunning Nettle Butterfly devised a crafty plan to destroy Little Grey Star.

“Til soon rescue you from this revolting toad!’ she said to her Caterpillar Cousins and Beetle and Slug friends and then flitted out of the garden.

“And she returned being chased by a Very Silly Little Boy waving a cap in his hand, with which he thought he was going to catch the pretty Butterfly at any moment.

“But the cunning Butterfly only pretended she was about to be caught: she landed on a flower, as if not noticing the Very Silly Little Boy, and then suddenly took wing right in

front of his nose and flew to the next flower-bed.

“And she thus lured the Very Silly Little Boy into the heart of the garden, to the very path where Little Grey Star was sitting and chatting to the Wise Starling.

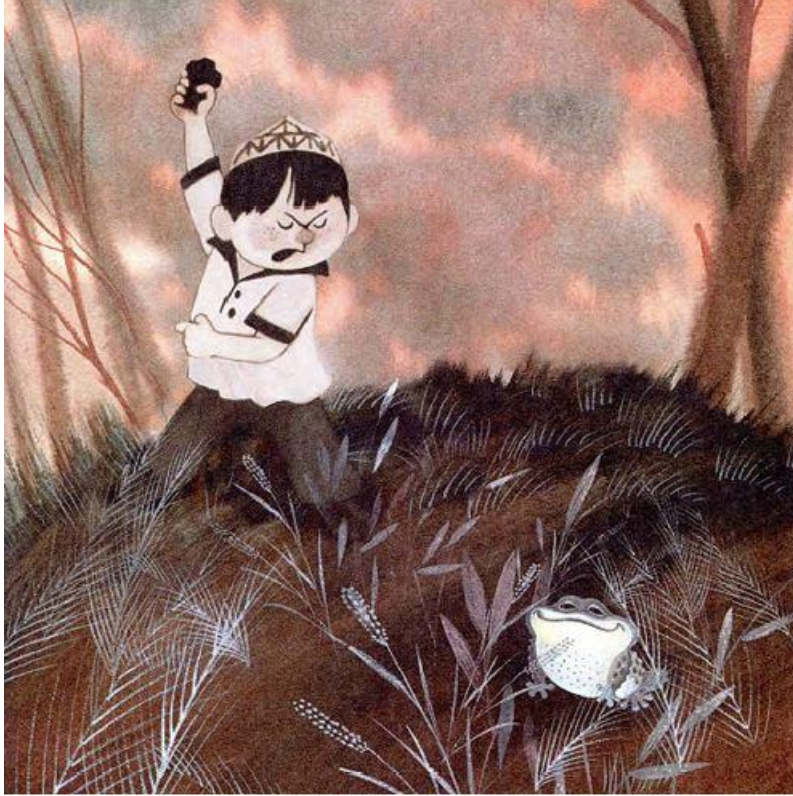
“The Butterfly was at once punished for her mean trick because the Wise Starling streaked down from the branch and snatched her in his beak. But it was already too late

because the Very Silly Little Boy had spotted Little Grey Star.

““A toad, a toad!’ he shrieked in a very silly voice. ‘Oooh, how disgusting! Beat the toad! Beat it!’

“Little Grey Star didn’t realize at first whom he was speaking about. Nobody, you see, had ever called him a toad. He froze and then the Very Silly Little Boy aimed a stone at him.





“‘Little Star, run!’ screeched the Wise Starling in despair and almost choked on the Butterfly.

“At that moment a heavy stone crashed onto the ground near Little Grey Star. Fortunately, the Very Silly Little Boy had missed, and Little Grey Star managed to jump aside. The Flowers and Grass hid him from view but the Very Silly Little Boy didn’t give up. He gathered a few more stones and started chucking them towards the swaying Grass and Flowers.

“‘Toad! Poisonous toad!’ he yelled. ‘Beat the filthy brute!’

“‘Little fool! Little fool!’ screeched the Wise Starling at him. ‘Why are you so muddle-headed? But he’s useful, he is! That’s clear, isn’t it?’

“But the Very Silly Little Boy grabbed a stick and climbed into the middle of the Rose Bush where he thought Little Grey Star was hiding.

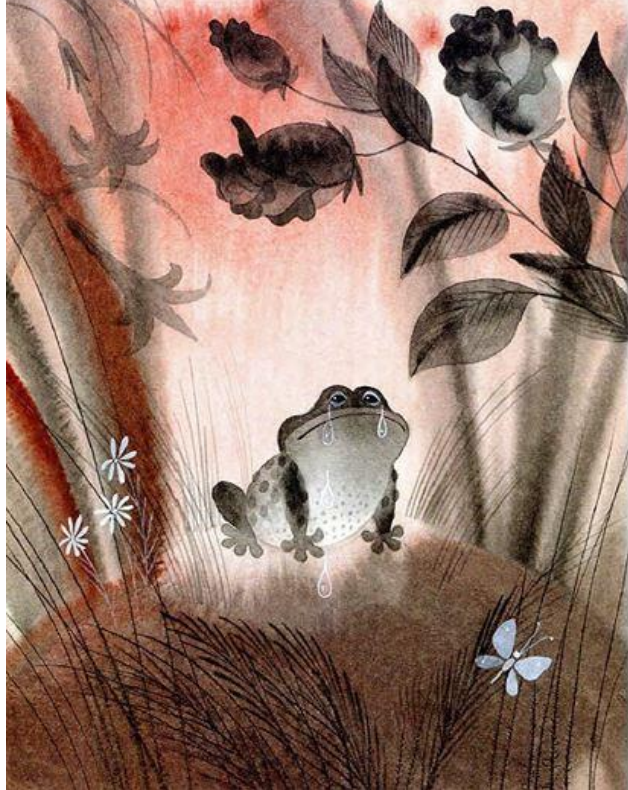
“The Rose Bush pricked him with her sharp spikes as hard as she could and the Very Silly Little Boy rushed out of the garden, howling.”

“Hurrah!” cried Baby Hedgehog.

“Yes, dear, spikes are a good thing to have!” continued Daddy Hedgehog. “If Little Grey Star had had spikes, he probably wouldn’t have had to cry so bitterly that day. But, as you know, he didn’t have spikes and that’s why he sat under the Rose Bush’s roots and wept very bitterly indeed.

“‘He called me a toad,’ he sobbed, ‘a filthy brute! That’s what Person said, and, after all, People know absolutely everything! That means, I’m a toad, a toad!’

“Everyone did all they could to comfort him: the Pansies said that he would always remain their dear Little Grey Star; the Roses said that beauty wasn’t the most important thing in life (which was a big sacrifice on their part). ‘Don’t cry, Goldie,’ seconded the Marigolds, and the Bluebells murmured: ‘Ting-a-ling, Ting-a-ling,’ which also sounded very comforting.



“But Little Grey Star was crying so bitterly that he couldn’t hear the words of comfort. That’s always the case when one starts consoling too early. The Flowers didn’t know this but the Wise Starling did only too well. He let Little Grey Star have a good cry and then said: ‘I’m not going to comfort you, my dear. All I’ll say is this: there’s nothing in a name. And, in any case, it doesn’t matter at all what some Silly Muddle-Headed Little Boy says about you! To all your Friends, you were and always will be Little Grey Star. That’s clear, isn’t it?’

“And he began whistling a tune about... about a famous Hedgehog to cheer Little Grey Star up and show that he considered the conversation over.

“Little Grey Star stopped crying.

““You’re right, of course, dear Starling,’ he said. ‘Of course, there’s nothing in a name... But all the same... all the same I don’t think I’ll come into the garden in the daytime any

more so as... so as not to meet anyone silly...’

“And from that day on Little Grey Star, and all his brothers, sisters, children and grandchildren came into the garden to their Useful Work only at night.”



Daddy Hedgehog cleared his throat and said: "And now you can ask questions."

"How many?" asked Baby Hedgehog.

"Three," replied his father.

"Oh! Then... my first is: is it true that Stars, I mean, toads don't eat Butterflies, or is this only make-believe!"

"It's true."

"And the Very Silly Little Boy said that toads are poisonous. Is this true?"

"It's rubbish! Of course, I wouldn't advise you to put them in your hands but they're not at all poisonous."

"And is it true... Is this already my third question?"

"Yes, it is. That's all."

“What do you mean ‘that’s all’?”

“What I said. You see, you’ve already asked it. Your question was: ‘Is this already my third question?’”

“Oh, Daddy, you’re always teasing me.”

“Oh, how clever you are! Alright then, so be it, ask your question.”

“Oh, I’ve forgotten... Oh, yes... Where did all those horrid enemies really vanish?”

“Why, he gobbled them up, of course. He simply seized them so fast with his tongue that nobody had time to notice, and it seemed as if they had just vanished into thin air. And

now it’s my turn to ask a question, my little furry one: isn’t it time for us to go to sleep? After all, we’re also useful and must also do our Useful Work at night, and now it’s already morning...”